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Charles Steinfeld defines the problem. Mr. Steinfeld is a successful businessman whose fund raising firm has worked with some of Chicago's most distinguished institutions. He attended the University of Chicago Divinity School briefly and considered becoming a Rabbi. He's in his seventies now, a member of a local synagogue, his wife is an invalid, he's a neighbor and a most active, intentional and committed member of the community of faith that lives its life at the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago. He and I have talked about this—logistically, pastorally and theologically. He told me he was walking in our courtyard one day enjoying the green grass and some sculpture we were exhibiting. The windows were open and the organist was playing *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.* Charlie's a smart guy and knew that the words were written by a famous anti-Semite. But it was beautiful, he said, and so he decided to come back in the morning for worship—on Reformation Sunday, which he did and which he has been doing weekly ever since—about six or seven years now. He attends Adult Education classes, organizes and leads a Passover Seder for us, occasionally teaches, and one of the unforgettable sights the ministers are privileged to see is Charlie, in his pew on Christmas Eve, his face illuminated by candlelight in a sea of faces, singing his heart out, "Joy to the World, the Lord has come."

We had a Christological conversation once. "What do you think about him? Charlie," I asked. "You know, Jesus." "I like him a lot," Charlie said. "He was a Jew—a good one. I suppose I think about him a lot like those other Jews—Peter, Andrew, James. They didn't know what to make of him either but they liked him enough to want to be around him. I'm like them. And besides, my Christology (he attended Divinity School long enough to have picked up the vocabulary) is as well developed as a lot of people I see sitting around me on Sunday morning, I'll bet."

One time I preached a sermon, "Do You Have to Go to Church to be a Christian?" Charlie wrote me a note and said the more interesting question was "Do You Have to be a Christian to go to Church?"

The first real problem the early Christian Church, which was thoroughly Jewish, had was—what to do with "God fearing gentiles" who were hanging around. Our dilemma is the opposite: what to do with a Jesus-intoxicated Jew!

Charlie represents a new reality for the institutional church—a reality increasingly inside as well as in the culture. Charlie defines it. So does

Debbie Brown, a devout Presbyterian with an evangelical bent. Her husband's name is Steve Rosenberg Their daughter is being raised in both faith traditions. She will be Bat Mitzvaed—and she is in the Confirmation class at Fourth Presbyterian Church. And she and her parents are raising the issue of why they have to choose one or the other?

I heard John Mulder describe ours as the most religiously pluralistic country in the world. There are seventy denominations in the Louisville phone book; the U.S. Military provides Buddhist, Muslim, and recently, Voodoo, chaplains along with Will Herberg's now obsolete formula—Protestant/Catholic/Jew. Your student bodies define it: they are not Presbyterian, nor particularly Christian any more. They reflect a new radically diverse American culture.

In the March 15 issue of *The Christian Century,* Bob Abernathy, Executive Editor and on-the-air host of the PBS series *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly,* described the "Highway of Heaven," a stretch of highway outside Washington that boasts an amazing variety of new places of worship for Vietnamese Catholics, Korean Presbyterians, Cambodian Buddhists, Ukrainian Orthodox, Spanish Seventh-Day Adventists, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, and tucked away among all the newcomers, American Episcopalians, too.

The greatest challenge, Abernathy proposes, is "How do I remain committed to the truth of my own faith and, at the same time, learn to understand and respect the faith of others? Are there many paths up God's mountain, any one of which will lead to the summit? Is my path better than all the others? Or is mine the only one that goes all the way?"[i]

It is the fundamental challenge before us at the beginning of the 21st century, maybe the overiding issue before the church: theological integrity in the midst of close-at-hand theological diversity.

I was struck by the way Joe Small began an essay on pluralism. Quoting C.P. Snow, Joe wrote, "The number 2 is a very dangerous number . . .Attempts to divide anything into two ought to be regarded with much suspicion." Joe proposes that part of the problem we are having in the Presbyterian church at the moment derives from the fact that we seem to think that every issue has just two sides, every decision a "yes" or "no," and proposes, helpfully, I thought, that dichotomy is an artificial construct, not always descriptive of reality—whose result will inevitably be the division of the body, whatever it is, into two camps, and the disappearance of any "common ground," which unfortunately seems like an accurate description of where we find ourselves in the Presbyterian Church these days.[ii]

Have you ever wondered what it's like to be on the receiving end of Christian evangelism, particularly the more combative type; to be told in essence, that the God in whom you believe, to whom you have been

praying, from whom you have received comfort, sustenance, and meaning, doesn't exist? I wonder what it's like to be informed that the religious ceremonies which have given order and symmetry to life are superstitious pagan rituals.

I have learned through experience that to tell someone that his/her beliefs are utterly wrong is not a good way to begin a conversation. I know that when someone does that to me, some of my least attractive characteristics are stimulated and awakened. I hear the faint but clear trumpet call to battle, my conversation partner becomes an opponent and verbal combat is about to begin. I have learned through experience that if my purpose is to share my truth with another human being, the best way to begin is to relate somehow to the truth the other person possesses: to acknowledge that the other has access to truth, to respect the other, particularly that truth to which the other clings tightly and which gives order to his life, i.e., his religion.

I have concluded that to be on the receiving end of some of the more belligerent Christian evangelism is to be relegated to the status of spiritual imbecility, or at best, ignorant immaturity—darkness, to use the metaphor of choice of the Southern Baptist Convention. And I further conclude that the evangelistic zeal which assumes that we have all the truth and others have none of the truth, seriously diminishes and misrepresents the God around whom the whole enterprise is supposed to revolve. It is also the prelude usually to real historic disaster and tragedy. In their more extreme fundamentalist expressions both Christianity and Islam take that position. And when they happen to meet in the same neighborhood, trouble soon follows, as we have tragically experienced.

Now a brief, but necessary theological interlude. The theologians have always known that as soon as human being start to talk about God, God is going to be limited by the perceptions, imaginations, intellects of the people doing the talking. As soon as you talk about God, as soon as you use the word God itself—you limit God, which is a form of idolatry. At some time in his or her faith journey, every student of theology concludes that the only honest posture is silence before the unknowable mystery of the holy other God.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Paul Tillich and Harvey Cox all proposed a moratorium on God-talk. Tillich held that the great words of the faith—hope, love, grace, sin, salvation—sometimes become so trivialized and degraded that we need to cease using them for a generation. But if that were the rule, the theologians would be out of work and so at our best we try to remind ourselves that the theological enterprise—the enterprise of thinking about God, whether it is in Swift Hall at the University of Chicago, or the pulpit, or your bedroom when you say your nightly prayers—the enterprise needs to begin with what Joseph Sittler used to call a profound modesty before the reality of God. When God is no longer a mystery: when God is altogether known and understood—God is no

longer God, but merely the projection of the mind that thinks it understands. It was Augustine, after all, who said that if you understand, it isn't God. Thus Martin Luther could talk about "the Hidden God," who exists beyond all human religious systems. In our day, that intriguing concept was echoed by Paul Tillich under the guise "the God beyond theism." It is a mind-stretching, discomforting and altogether healthy concept. But it is not, in any way, a universally accepted idea. In fact, it is dismissed in some quarters as too soft, too liberal. In fact, the tilt of history at this point in time is in the other direction. The God of religion can be understandable, simple, knowable, familiar, manageable, provincial and rather small and a comfortable reflection of the particular people.

Dava Sobel has written a wonderful new historical memoir, *Galileo's Daughter*, an account of the correspondence between the scholar/mathematician and his daughter, Sister Maria Celeste at the Monastery of San Matteo in Florence. The book is also the account of Galileo's conflicts with the Vatican.

Galileo knew Copernicus was right—the sun, not the earth, was at the center of the Solar System. The way he chose to make his argument was in a book, *Dialogues on the Tides,* a play-like discussion among a group of fictional friends.

Salviati—Galileo's alter-ego and spokesperson

Sagredo—an intelligent and receptive man of means, and

Simplicio—a pompous Aristotelian who is certain of his truth, loves to drop Latin phrases and is played for a fool.

Galileo, of course, is arguing for a truth bigger than anyone's perception of it—against a religion that had to be absolutely sure of itself and could admit to no greater truth than its own.

At one point, Sagredo says in exasperation: "Oh, the presumptuous, rash ignorance of mankind."[iii]

In South Africa, the theologians and biblical scholars used to propose, with a straight face, that apartheid is in the divine order of things. Adolph Hitler had really very little difficulty finding religious types who would represent God as an Aryan who had so turned his back on his Semitic children that they could legitimately be led into the gas chambers. The churches, our church, after all, was once convinced that slavery was God's will.

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[i] Robert Abernathy, "Paradox of Pluralism, Faithful and Respectful," *The Christian Century,* March 15, 2000, p. 294

[ii] Joseph D. Small, *Church Fears, Committed Conversations,* Presbyterian Church (USA) Office of Theology and Worship, 1999, p.1

[iii] Dava Sobel, *Galileo's Daughter,* Walker & Co., New York, 1999, p. 173,174)

The issue has been around a long time. At the beginning of our tradition, the Pentateuch proposes the reality of monotheism: "There is no other." (Deuteronomy 4:35, NRSV) Moses is addressing Israel, recalling their experience in Egypt and the Exodus. "To you it was shown, that you might know that the Lord is God: there is no other." That's the radical word that comes to Israel—there is one God: Yahweh is God's name. That is the great genius of Judaism. God is one—but as soon as the word is out of Moses' mouth, an internal argument begins between those who want to proceed narrowly. God's oneness is our private secret, our God is the real God, yours is a fake—and those who take the broad, universal road—the one God is Lord of the Babylonians too, only they use a different vocabulary. Remember the story of Jonah? When God calls Jonah to go to Nineveh, the point of the story is not the voyage and the big fish, although they get all the press. The point of the whole story is Jonah's theological provincialism. Jonah is certain that the Ninevites are rascals, pagans, sinners, utterly lost, absolutely wrong theologically and deserving of whatever they get which he assumes is judgment with a capital "J." That God loves Ninevites and that he is going to be merciful to them is a shattering thought to Jonah—much harder to swallow than he was for the whale, and when the story ends, the reader isn't sure Jonah ever got the point of the whole exercise.

At their better moments, God's people know that they are chosen—not to be God's only children, but to show the world what it looks like to live as God's children, to show the world what human life is supposed to look like. God's children are to be a light—so the whole world can see. But there is always internal tension in the Bible between the broad humanitarian position and the tendency toward religious exclusiveness which sounds like a game of "mine is better than yours," "my dad can lick your dad," played on the vast stage of history.

It is there clearly in the life of Jesus. It surfaces every time he bumps into religious zealots of his day who cannot understand how he can associate with "them"—with obvious sinners, with all those who live outside the boundaries of the community, morally, theologically, socially.

It was the toughest issue facing the early Christian church. When Matthew wrote his gospel, several decades after the Crucifixion and Resurrection, the early Christians were asking themselves whether God cared enough about Gentiles for them to bother telling the story of Jesus in Gentile cities. Or should they, Jewish Christians, simply stay put, enjoy this new theological insight and look down their noses at the rest of the world.

Thus the Gospel of Matthew ends with this wonderful scene: the Risen Christ is on a mountain with his followers. It is a mountain very much like the mountain on which Moses negotiated the original covenant. It is the setting for what we know as the great Missionary Commission. "Go—to all the world making disciples." Just as the radical word to Israel was that

there is one God for all the world—so our Lord here tells his followers that the Gospel is for the world—the whole world. The new word here was "all nations." The first and most important intent of our Lord's words was to break open the exclusivism of religion, to shatter the tempting comfortable provincialism which concludes that God cares mainly about me and people like me. Jesus' intent was to broaden the focus of the early Christians so they would become a church for the whole world.

And so, into the world his followers have gone, compelled by the soul-stirring vigor of the Great Commission. We have gone more faithfully when we have listened carefully to those to whom we have gone and remembered God's great and passionate love for them. But there have been plenty of incidents when missionary zeal was simply reformulated provincialism. Not long after Jesus said the word, for instance, the Roman Empire became Christian by fiat and the historians tell us that one of the ways the Great Commission was fulfilled during the wars with Barbarian tribes was for the Legions to march the defeated tribe into the closest river—at sword point—for baptism—and a thousand years after men and women were being killed in the Coliseum for believing in Christ, Christians had turned the table and were killing men and women for not believing, filling the streets of Jerusalem with infidel blood, ankle deep.

But more fascinating are the bursts of missionary activity through history which occurred when people listened and were receptive to God's Holy Spirit. The allure of the Island of Iona, off the western coast of Scotland is in that. For hundreds of years, beginning in the sixth century, Irish monks lived there, the last body of free land from which Ireland is visible, and from there sailed off for Great Britain and the Continent, telling the story of Jesus. Or the Jesuits, in Korea and Japan humbly and modestly living the life. The powerful motion picture, <u>The Mission,</u> did a superb job, I thought, telling the story of the incredible sacrifice and devotion of Christians in South America, under the power of the Great Commission. Or the thousands upon thousands of men and women who responded to the Great Commission in the last century and this, by going from America to China, Japan, Africa. Or today, the Presbyterians, Baptists and Lutherans who practice medicine in Zaire and Nicaragua and work for peace in Northern Ireland, or Tirana, Albania, and Kosovo: the teachers, nurses, farmers and pastors who go today into all the world in the name of Jesus Christ.

There is something about the Missionary Enterprise that embarrasses us sometimes. It has become fashionable intellectually to blame Christian missionaries for colonialism and the disregard and ruin of indigenous culture. The argument goes that missionaries were really just forerunners for Western business interests; that worse yet, missionaries brought more Western culture than Gospel and in the process trampled and ruined the culture of the people they were evangelizing. James Michener told the sad part of the story in *Hawaii*. But that is only part of the story and, in actuality, a very small part. Harvard Professor Lamin Sanneh, an African scholar from Gambia, wrote an essay in *The Christian Century* that

challenges the fashionable and popular anti-missionary position. Christian missionaries, the professor observes, were responsible for translating Scripture into 1800 languages and in the process were directly responsible for creating written language for many of them. That process, he argues, has enhanced and preserved indigenous culture. It has instilled awareness and pride in indigenous people and instead of supporting political oppression, actually was the breeding ground for independence and nationalism which spelled the end of colonialism. The professor scolds Western Christians for their guilt complex about missionary activity and his is a word we need to hear.[iv]

But the old issue remains. It is raised by the Great Commission to go into all the world and make disciples. It is the matter of religious exclusivism, the temptation to portray our news as the only news. There is something about us apparently, that concludes that my truth has to be the only truth. And there is something about the time in which we live that needs the certainty, the absolute certainty, which religious fundamentalism and evangelical exclusivism provides. Martin Marty observes the world-wide "resurgent fundamentalism of the kind that has gained political power in Shiite Islamic Iran—and is behind a powerful Opus Dei movement in the Roman Catholic Church, and which surfaces among belligerent American Protestants promoting Christian Yellow Pages."[v]

In a world of ambiguity and rapid change and political instability, religious certainty has enormous appeal. But it is also a world growing ever smaller, a global village, and we have become a racially and religiously pluralistic nation beyond any one's wildest imagination. In Chicago, Serbs, Croats, Bosnians live on the same block. Sudanese, Nigerians, Ghanans, shop together. Vacant synagogues are bought by Black Muslims. Old mainline churches are now Buddhist temples.

What the world needs is a theology which is committed to its truth—but at the same time appreciates pluralism and teaches respect as a fundamental virtue. We need to listen to scholars like African theologian John Mbiti who wrote eloquently and poignantly. "God must have been active among African people as he was among the Jewish people . . . was he not there in other times and in such places as Mount Fugi and Mount Kenya as well as Mount Sinai?" Mbiti noted the incredible growth of the Christian Church in Africa. In 1900 there were 9 million Christians in Africa, 7% of the population. In 1980 there were 200 million, 45% of the population. He writes: "The God described in the Bible is none other than the God who is already known in the framework of traditional African religiosity. The missionaries who introduced the Gospel to Africa in the past 200 years did not bring God to our Continent. Instead, God brought

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[iv] Lamin Sanneh, "Christian Missions and the Western Guilt Complex," *The Christian Century,* April 8, 1987

[v] Martin E. Marty, *By Way of Response, Journeys in Faith,* Robert A. Raines, Editor, Abingdon, Nashville, 1981, p. 39

them. They proclaimed the name of Jesus Christ. But they used the names of the God who was and is already known by African people."[vi]

We need the sensitivity of Episcopal priest, Barbara Brown Taylor, who observes that "Christianity has many paradoxes;" that one of them is that "we believe Jesus is the only way and his way teaches us to live in peace with other ways. Because of Him, I can learn from people who call God by other names. The way of openness to God, the way of relationship with other people, this way of unconditional love is the only way for me. I don't know any other way to find God."[vii]

The Bottom Line?

Is the point of it all to get everybody singing out of the same hymnal? Saying the same creed? Using the same vocabulary? Does going into the world, making disciples, baptizing, mean turning the whole world into one big Southern Baptist revival, or Roman Parish, or dour Scottish Kirk? Heaven forbid. In fact, the effort has not only not produced much peace and happiness, but has contributed a fair amount of intolerance, bloodshed and suffering to the sad story of history. "Making Christians," playing "Conversion Box Score" as an isolated imperative, is not the point. I am moved by Marty's simple, human integrity when he writes, "Never again approaches to mission that make God into a predator . . . dependent on my ability to pounce on others. Never can I make proselytism the focus of my relation to others."[viii]

No more targets, please. When the Southern Baptists recently "targeted" Jews, Muslims and Hindus" on their holiest days for conversion, for deliverance from the darkness in which they were living, even Billy Graham pulled away. Our responsibility, Graham reminded the leaders of his own church, is to proclaim Good News—to live good news—and to let the rest—including the matter of ultimate salvation—and final truth—up to God.

There is another word, an alternative position which came to the early Christians who wrote the New Testament, particularly St. Paul—our first missionary. It is that God's purpose in creating a world and a human race in the world, God's purpose in becoming incarnate in Jesus Christ is to heal, to make whole, to reconcile the whole creation. Paul himself has to struggle to find words big enough to say it. God wants a creation at peace with itself—God wants all things to come together. God wants to love all the children of the world so they will enjoy life and live it in peace and harmony and justice and joy. I find in that alternative Biblical word compelling power and relevance, and an impulse to religious integrity and perhaps even theological bravery.

[vi] John Mbiti, "The Encounter of Christian Faith and African Religion," *Theologians in Transition,* p. 54,55
[vii] Robert Abernathy, op.cit., p. 295
[viii] Martin E. Marty, op.cit., p. 111

What is the missionary commission—to our age—to you and me? It is to go into all the world and tell the story of Jesus. It is to go into the world and tell about God's great love for the creation. Our task is not to shout louder than anybody else, argue harder and convince more thoroughly: it is to tell the story of God's love, to bear witness to God's love; to live out the liberating, joyful truth we have discovered.

Our missionary task is to go into this world and to baptize this culture, with the gentleness and justice of Jesus, not to fight it out on the street corners with colorful brochures and blaring bull horns. Our task is to go into a world that has heard bits and pieces of the story, and to live it, by baptizing hurting people with a love that values each one of them, and that respects them for their humanity. That is a radical word in our world. And it is a startlingly persuasive world when someone has the courage to live it, particularly where religion and ideology divide violently, tragically: Northern Ireland, Israel, Palestine; Kosovo, the Sudan, Algeria, Nigeria. Evangelism does not mean slicker devices to persuade the customer to buy our product, marketing Jesus Christ like soap powder; it means to witness to the Lordship of Jesus Christ by the way we live life and by the way we are the church. People are convinced when they see it: when in the name of Christ, the homeless are sheltered, the hungry fed, the naked clothed, the grieving comforted, the guilty forgiven, the frightened encouraged, the lonely loved, the oppressed set free, and the story told.

One of the unforgettable experiences of my year as Moderator of our General Assembly was a visit to Ocijek, Croatia, just months after the cease-fire. We visited Vukovar, where Serbian forces targeted public buildings, the soul of the community, schools, hospitals, libraries, town halls, for destruction, and retreating forces mined abandoned houses to greet their returning owners. We visited Vinkovsci where Serbians blew up the Roman Catholic Cathedral and Croation Catholics retaliated by blowing up the Orthodox Cathedral. We have a little Reformed Church in Vinkovsci, by the way. It was hit by a mortar shell which caused extensive damage. Our One Great Hour of Sharing helped repair and restore the church and manse, and I was there on the Sunday after Easter to represent our church and to preside at the Lord's Table—an unforgettable experience. We visited the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Ocijek where there is a remarkably diverse student body from Central Europe, North Africa, Russia, and the Ukraine. The President is Peter Kuzmic—who describes himself as a Calvinist Pentecostal. Peter is a recognized missiologist with sound academic credentials. Peter understands not only the great missionary commission but also the uniqueness of his own very diverse culture. Peter told me that in a part of the world that has never forgotten the brutality of the Crusades, the word "crusade"—even "evangelistic crusade," sounds like an assault, a threat. "Balkan Harvest" was the ill-advised name given to an evangelistic initiative concocted by Western evangelicals. "Do you have any idea how offensive that sounds to Croation Catholics, Serbian Orthodox, not to mention Bosnian Muslims?" Peter asks.

Peter pleads for "missiological authenticity," i.e., the genuine love and justice of Jesus, and while we were in Ocijek, we met a man who seemed to express it perfectly.

His name is Antol Bolag, a Serbian businessman who decided to commit his life to Christian mission and signed on with the Agape Project, a refugee service and resettlement initiative connected to the Evangelical Seminary and funded, in part, by our One Great Hour of Sharing. Antol's job was to bring together the materials and labor and coordinate the rebuilding of Muslim villages destroyed by the Serbians. Antol was working with a Muslim village chief to rebuild the village and resettle its exiled occupants. He noticed that the rebuilding plans did not include the Mosque which had been leveled. He inquired of the village chief: "Why no Mosque?" and the chief said, "You're Christians aren't you? Why would you help us rebuild our house of worship?" And Antol was able to answer, "We will help you rebuild your Mosque <u>because</u> we are followers of Jesus, and he told us to love our neighbors and he told a story about a man who stopped beside the road to help a stranger, whose religion was different, but whose need was very human."

That's authenticity. That's authentic Christian witness in the midst of unexpected and unprecedented religious diversity.

At our best over the past 2,000 years, we have heard the Commission and gone into all the world and told the story and lived the truth and people have believed it. Today the Great Commission is an invitation to believe radically and boldly that God's eternal love extends even to those who don't know about Jesus, or who do know but choose not to believe. It is an invitation to experience and tell about a love so big it includes all nations; a love so infinite and intimate it embraces each one of us; a love so powerful it brings new life, new freedom, new joy to those who receive it and know and live in it; a love that is not afraid of human diversity, but has created it. It is an invitation to let go of the exclusivism which is so comfortable and so very tempting and to believe boldly that all things, even human history, are in the hands of God. It is an invitation to live the truth we have been given and to trust that in God's time, by God's grace, and through the incredible and inevitable power of God's love, there will be a day when, in St. Paul's unforgettable images, God, in the fullness of time, will gather up all things in heaven and things on earth (Ephesians 1:10).